

TWO AIRBORNE RAIDS IN NORTH VIETNAM

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DURING the eight years of war waged by the French Army in Vietnam against the Communist forces of the Vietminh, the two military actions which earned the greatest material and moral success—with the least losses and in the shortest time—were the airborne raids on 9 November 1952 at Phu-Doan, and on 17 July 1953 at Lang Son.

Due to the accuracy of intelligence information, the surprise, and the gallantry of the engaged units, these operations in the enemy's rear areas permitted the capture or destruction of important armament and ammunition dumps supporting all the Vietminh activity in North Vietnam. The increasing destructive power of nuclear weapons may well lead to an increase in the possibility of more little "brush fire" wars.

It is for that reason that the study of these two French airborne operations presents both historical and didactic interest. In an alliance the knowledge of an ally's experiences—failures and successes—is the basis of increase in efficiency.

After a brief outline of the general situation in Vietnam in October 1952, the planning and execution of the raids will be analyzed to include lessons learned during those operations.

General Situation

When the surprise Vietminh attack began on 19 October 1946 in Hanoi, the French Army had only about 30,000 men

in Indochina (area of about 300,000 square miles, population, 29 million inhabitants). Initially, from 1946 to 1950, warfare was of the "guerrilla" type. Then, slowly, due to the Communist organization and the Chinese help, an open struggle took place from the end of 1950 to 1954.

When the Vietminh High Command launched the invasion of the Thai-country in the autumn of 1952, a balance of power had been reached. (Figure 1.) The objectives of the operation were conquest of a departure line against Laos, liaison with Siam, and capture of the precious opium crop.

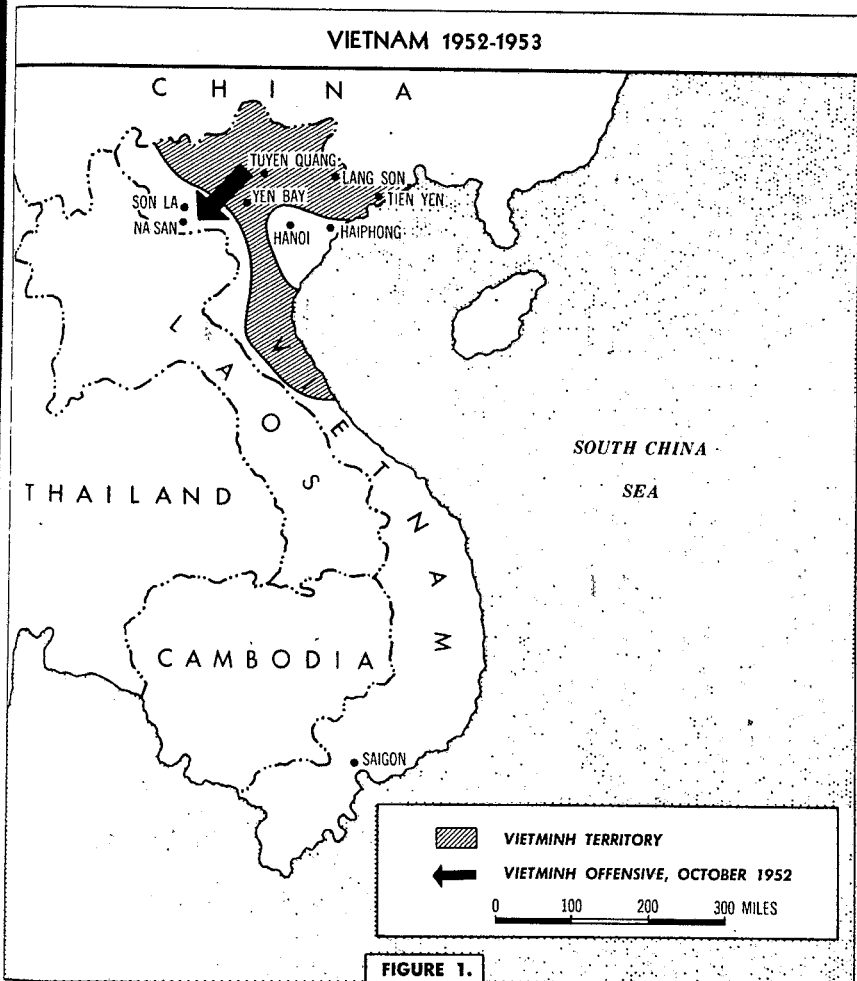
At this time the Vietminh Army included, in addition to 300,000 local auxiliaries and 120,000 provincial "guerrilleros," a Regular Army with six infantry divisions and one artillery division of about 100,000 well-equipped and well-trained soldiers. On 23 October 1952 Red divisions crossed the Black River, moving toward the southwest. Supply for these troops came from the area of Tuyen Quang, via Yen Bay.

The French High Command, instead of dissipating their efforts in a frontal defense, decided to hit the line of communications and enemy dumps in the vital zone of Phu-Doan, between Tuyen Quang and Yen Bay. The attack of Yen Bay, advanced base of the Vietminh offensive action against the Thai-country, would have been the best maneuver, of course. However, the available means in ground and air

Partners in future alliances must be prepared to work and plan together now if they are to attain the ultimate in cooperation. This must include coordination of organization, technical development, and tactics

units were not sufficient to conduct such an operation. There remained only the possibility of undertaking an action

started from Vietri. By early November a strong task force of infantry and armor had reached an area about 20 miles from



against Phu-Doan, which was code named *Lorraine*.

Undertaken in October, *Lorraine* essentially was an expanded ground raid which

the important crossroads of Phu-Doan, where roads and waterways came together to permit the supply of the Vietminh offensive.

Phu-Doan Operation

It was decided to launch an airborne operation of regimental combat team size on each side of the Song-Chay River to assure the destruction of dumps and installations of the enemy. A motorized column was to effect a linkup with the air-

borne force on the morning of 9 November to drop the force first to seize the crossing of the road over the river and the crossroads, and then to destroy the enemy's dumps. The infantry-armor task force, beginning its move during the preceding night, was to link up with the paratroopers during the day.

AIRBORNE RAID ON PHU-DOAN

9 NOVEMBER 1952

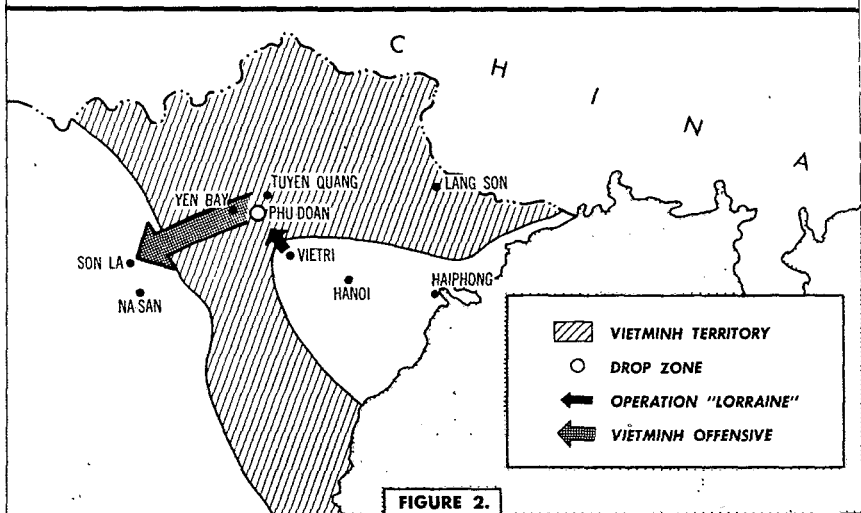


FIGURE 2.

borne force. Code name *Marion* was given to the airborne operation. (Figure 2.)

The concept of operation was on the

Lieutenant Colonel Albert Merglen has been an officer in the French Army for 20 years. From 1939 to 1955 he served with various units to include mountain, Moroccan, commandos, and paratroop in Europe, North Africa, Indochina, and Algeria. He was executive officer with the 2d Foreign Legion Paratrooper Battalion in the airborne raid on Phu-Doan and commanding officer of the battalion during the Lang Son attack. Upon his graduation in 1957 from the French War College in Paris, he was assigned to the faculty of the United States Army Infantry School where he is French Liaison Officer.

The entire area would be mopped up for a few days before withdrawing to Vietri. It was known that the enemy had fairly strong forces in the region of Phu-Doan.

The airborne task force included three battalions (1st and 2d Foreign Legion Paratrooper Battalions, and the 3d Colonial Paratrooper Battalion), two platoons each of three 75-mm recoilless rifles, one platoon of engineers with crossing equipment, and one destruction platoon. Available for the operation were 53 C-47's (*Dakota's*) which were to fly two sorties each and would use Hanoi as departure airfields.

The plan provided for the simultaneous dropping of two battalions at 0930, one

with the headquarters of the force on a drop zone north of the Song-Chay, the other on a drop zone south of the river. The drop was to be conducted after neutralization of the bordering villages by fighter planes, and under the protection of B-26 bombers circling over the area during the operation. At 1230 another battalion was to be dropped on the northern drop zone. The jump altitude was 600 feet. The drop zones would be marked with smoke grenades launched by a pathfinder plane three minutes before the inflight of the first serials.

Conduct of the Operation

The operation went off as planned—2,354 paratroopers captured the airhead at the cost of one killed and 16 wounded. At 1700 linkup was made with the motorized task force which assumed command of the airborne force.

Important armament, ammunition, and supply dumps were found. The following material was recovered: 34 mortars, 30 antitank rocket launchers, 14 machine-guns, 40 submachineguns, 250 rifles, and two 57-mm recoilless rifles. For the first time a Russian "Molotova" truck was captured. The paratroopers carried out the mopping up of the area, destroyed armament factories and food dumps, and dispatched long-range patrols in the direction of Yen Bay with very few losses. On 16 November, after a week of operation, they were brought back by trucks to Hanoi.

Unfortunately, this fine success was dimmed by a last-hour reverse. When the ground task force of *Lorraine* withdrew two days later as planned, the rear guard was ambushed by two Vietminh regiments and lost both men and matériel.

This operation highlighted the fact that although the capture of dumps in the enemy's rear areas is relatively easy by an airborne operation, it is very dangerous to stay there too long, exposed to a concentrated counterattack from enemy reserves.

Operation *Lorraine*, undertaken with weak forces, succeeded only in hindering the Vietminh offensive in the Thai-country, and did not stop it. The capital, Son La, was captured by the enemy before the end of November, and the French command was obliged to regroup its isolated units around the airfield of Na-San.

The paratrooper battalions which had jumped on Phu-Doan were air-transported to Na-San two days after their return to Hanoi. General Gilles, commander of the airborne forces in North Vietnam, assumed command of the defending forces. Three Vietminh divisions tried in vain to overrun Na-San and were forced to withdraw from the Thai-country with heavy losses.

Lang Son Operation

During the spring of 1953 a new Vietminh offensive on Laos failed in a campaign in which the paratrooper battalions again distinguished themselves. A degree in balance of power was attained. The Vietminh forces, however, were receiving increasing assistance from Communist China. To cut this logistical stream, an airborne operation, called *Hirondelle* (Swallow) was planned. The objective of the operation was Lang Son an important supply dump installation in the enemy's rear area. (Figure 3.)

The problem was one of capturing the town and the well-guarded dumps, and destroying material and installations. All this had to be accomplished and the airborne force returned to friendly territory before the Vietminh troops could react. The terrain, mountainous and wooded with only a few roads and trails, presented additional difficulties.

The enemy had available at Lang Son one local battalion and two provincial companies plus a few light antiaircraft units at the Chinese border, a distance of about eight miles. Elements of an infantry division located near Thai Nguyen could be available in approximately 48 hours. Be-

tween Lang Son and Tien Yen eight provincial companies were in a position to react during the first day and from four to six battalions the second day. It was, therefore, imperative that the operation be completed as rapidly as possible.

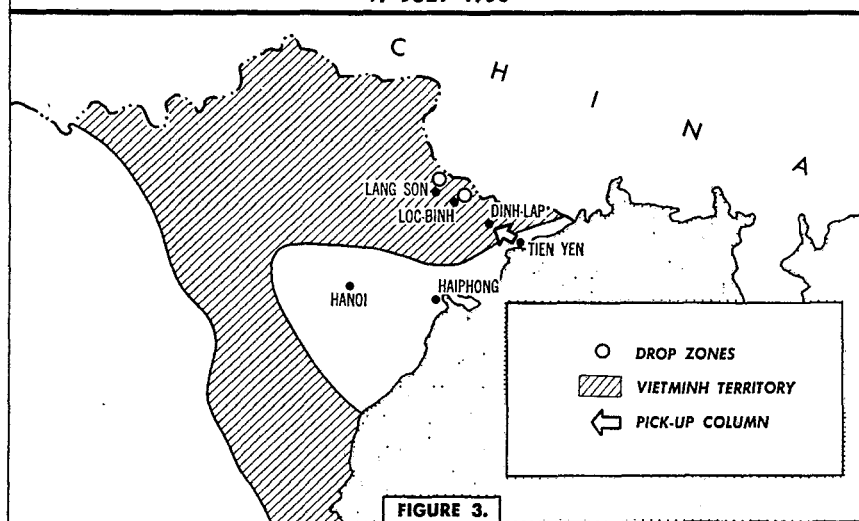
Concept of Operation

The concept of operation announced by General Gilles was to execute an airborne attack the morning of 17 July in order

Colonial Paratrooper Battalions, and the 2d Foreign Legion Paratrooper Battalion), and one platoon of engineers with 14 rubber boats. The pick-up or link-up column consisted of three infantry battalions, three "commandos," one tank platoon, and one company of engineers with three bulldozers. One paratrooper battalion and a battery of 75-mm recoilless rifle (airborne) were held in reserve on the departure airfields in Hanoi.

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to capture and destroy the dumps near Lang Son and to seize the crossing over the Song-Ky-Cung. This crossing, in the vicinity of Loc-Binh, constituted the essential point for the withdrawal. A ground action assisted by units attacking from Tien Yen was to take place from 17 to 21 July to permit the withdrawal of the paratrooper force by way of Loc-Binh and Dinh-Lap, to Tien Yen.

The airborne task force included a headquarters, three battalions (6th and 8th

Success of the operation depended upon complete surprise as to the date and location of the raid. For that reason all the preparatory planning was accomplished with the utmost secrecy by the force commander assisted only by an officer of G2. The G3 orders were put in written form on 15 July; the units were alerted at 1400 on 16 July and confined to barracks. At 1500 on 16 July the battalion commanders' briefing was held.

Since the airborne units could take with

them only organic light weapons and equipment, air support was planned carefully. Fighter aircraft were to attack all installations and observation posts detected on aerial photographs which could intervene on the drop zones. This action was to take place 15 minutes before jump time. Air fire support during the jump and for the subsequent reorganization was to be provided. In addition, provision was made for continuous strafing and bombing cover and for on-call night illumination from aerial bombs.

The raid began 17 July at 0810 when the headquarters and two battalions were dropped from 56 C-47's near Lang Son. At 1200, near Loc-Binh, the third battalion with the attached engineer platoon jumped from 29 C-47's.

The operation took place as planned. The Vietminh units were surprised completely. The local policemen and the provincial companies fled. Only the guard detachments of the dumps resolutely resisted. Important dumps were discovered and prepared for destruction by special teams. A large quantity of material was captured.

At 1600 the dumps were destroyed and all roads leading to the south and west were mined. The two battalions at Lang Son began their withdrawal. Meanwhile, the Loc-Binh battalion had secured the crossing over the Song-Ky-Cung and was protecting the flank against movement from the Chinese border.

At 2300, 18 July the first scouts of the ~~airborne force~~ met in the vicinity of Dinh-Lap, the ground column fighting up from Tien Yen. The engineers were able to repair the winding road to some degree and trucks took the paratroopers back in the last daylight hours of 19 July. On the morning of 20 July the airborne units were embarked in LCT's to be brought back to Haiphong, and then by trucks again to Hanoi. Of the 2,001 paratroopers who jumped in the operation, losses had been extremely light: one killed, one miss-

ing, three died from exhaustion during the march, and 21 wounded.

This remarkable success, considering the small forces engaged, had a profound repercussion in North Vietnam. The Vietminh war effort was hampered notably in the vital area of the Red River Delta. A wave of confidence spread through the friendly population and the army.

General Lessons

The two briefly described airborne raids were accomplished in a theater of operations of a particular type. It is, therefore, difficult to draw from them general lessons valid for all types of wars. However, some points are worthy of emphasis and could apply to other theaters.

First, intelligence is extremely important and must be centralized at the highest command level in order that it may be adapted to the ever-changing situation. Due to thorough research combined with the patient questioning of thousands of refugees, the intelligence agency in Hanoi had succeeded in drawing up an exact, precise, and detailed picture of the drop zones and their vicinity, and of the location and strength of the enemy units. Intelligence officers have a tremendous responsibility in operations of this type.

Second, if the information is correct, it is relatively easy to operate in the enemy's rear areas. It is very difficult for the enemy high command to have a clear appreciation of the situation, particularly if the airborne raiders do not remain in the same place but move at once. The most difficult problem is that of returning to friendly territory. In some circumstances, and in difficult zones, it is possible to split up the airborne force in small groups in order either to stay in the enemy country, or to return to friendly territory.

Third, all objectives are suitable for an airborne raid whether they be military, political, or economical. The sabotage of an industrial research plant may be as

important for the final victory as the elimination of a "quisling" government.

Fourth, it must be kept in mind that the varied possibilities of airborne raids can be realized only when the necessary means—that is, trained airborne units and planes in required quality and number—are available. The French High Command in Vietnam always was aware of the advantage of using paratroopers. In December 1950 there were 6,000; in 1951 about 11,000; and in 1954 more than a dozen picked battalions, half of them in the Vietnamese Army, were available with airborne support units of artillery, engineers, signal, and medical corps. The greatest shortage was in aircraft. This is a lesson to be remembered: it is not enough to have many, well-trained airborne units when the corresponding number in planes is not assured.

Fifth, the airborne raid involves a calculated risk. However, if carried out with

imagination and daring the benefits far outweigh the risks involved.

Conclusion

An airborne raid has many advantages in the event of a localized war, and particularly at the beginning of a conflict. The army that is provided with trained airborne troops and sufficient troop-carrier and assault planes possesses great flexibility. An airborne operation or a great number of airborne raids may well permit the attainment of vital objectives which otherwise would require large ground forces and extensive operations.

To attain the ultimate in cooperation the partners in future alliances must be prepared to work and plan together now. A common endeavor of organization, of technical development, and of doctrinal understanding would be of great benefit.

The French paratroopers, with many gallant actions behind them, stand ready imbued with the motto: *Who dares, wins!*

New firepower and mobility capabilities, plus new and improved means of control, permit wide flexibility in selection of the maneuver plan. Tactics should be designed to locate the enemy, determine his configuration, deliver appropriate fires on acquired targets, and exploit the resultant situations with highly mobile forces. On a strategic level, forces must be organized and equipped so that they can be delivered by air or surface transportation to any area of the world for engagement in either atomic or nonatomic situations on any reasonable type of terrain. Suitable air and surface lift must be provided. The time of initial intervention, particularly in limited war, may be just as important as the time required to close a sizable force.

Brigadier General T. F. Bogart